

Rockport Harbor Hotel – An affront to National Historic Design Standards

Recently, architects Meg Barclay and John Scholz authored an opinion about the currently proposed Rockport Harbor Hotel. In our opinion, Meg and John are in the top tier of local architects, and their many-decades long experience of producing fine and historic architecture gives their perspective weight.

Meg and John seek to support the RHH in its currently-proposed form as “fulfilling” the Secretary of the Interiors Standards for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings. These Standards require that additions to historic buildings be designed intentionally to distinguish the new work from the historic so as to make clear what is original and what was added later. Meg and John try to argue that those principles apply to the RHH, where they identify numerous architectural elements which do not correspond to the neighboring structures. However, the RHH is a new building, not an historic one, and the Standards have no bearing. Ms. Barclay and Mr. Scholz try to imply that the Standards apply because the RHH occurs in the middle of a recognized Historic District, but the language of the Standards makes clear they govern only additions to existing historic buildings.

However, one building to which the Secretary of the Interior Standards do apply is an historic structure immediately adjacent to the RHH lot. The Secretary’s office oversaw the rehabilitation of the Shepherd Block, which was painstakingly restored to these exceptionally high standards. The standards are so rigorous, and at times limiting, that the

developer was granted a sizable tax credit toward the additional expense required to ensure that the Shepherd Block was accurately preserved, for all future generations. Especially living in such a beautiful traditional village as Rockport, we are so fortunate that our Federal Government strongly supports the preservation of historic local structures.

The design of the RHH displays a complete disregard for the historic Shepherd Block, which has graced the downtown in its current form for well over a century; an entire façade is to be obliterated by this contemporary hotel. Far from respecting the established Historic District, the hotel will destroy not only an historic façade but, also, the historic Downtown viewscape to the harbor that has forever been enjoyed by all.

Where Meg and John's observations as architects should be noted is in their characterization of the RHH as distinct from its immediate neighbors. They state: "The hotel design has chosen the alternate path to delineation from the historic fabric." and ".... changes in cornice and roof heights, balconies and contemporary windows to distinguish it from its historic neighbors."

Agreed. The failure here is that Rockport's own Land Use Ordinance (Section 1003.2 Architectural Review Standards) states "The architectural design of structures and their materials and colors shall be visually harmonious with the overall appearance of neighboring structures." Thus, Rockport's laws demand harmony (Harmony: agreement, accord, per Meriam Webster, Dictionary.com, The Free Dictionary, etc.), not deviation in architectural expression. Here we have

two respected local architects highlighting the dissimilarities of the RHH to its environs, when in fact our LUO demands accord. Additionally, under section 913 DOWNTOWN DISTRICT, Section 913.1 defines “... standards for increased development potential on specific lots with street frontage on Central Street and Main Street consistent with historic patterns of development.” The historic pattern of development on the Hotel lot was never total lot coverage, and the side of the Shepherd Block and the vista of the harbor historically has always been fully in view. On top of that, Rockport Land Use Ordinance Section 913.3 Special District Standards apply: “To encourage patterns of development that are consistent with the historical development on the harbor side of Central Street.” Here again, our Ordinance requires consistency with the historic pattern. The historic condition in that Special District has been: that side of the Shepherd Block visible as a freestanding edifice, and an expanse of open view to the harbor.

Examined from the perspective of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards as they apply to the Shepherd Block, the RHH is an affront to preservationists and the public. Examined with respect to Rockport’s own Land Use Ordinance the RHH design fails to conform to specific requirements for the Downtown.

There is no doubt that a suitable hotel can be built in that location. But like every other development project in town, it must abide by our laws, which are a reflection and the embodiment of all we hold dear in our Village.

The Friends of Rockport